



# Foundation Document Overview

## Fort Larned National Historic Site

Kansas



### Contact Information

For more information about the *Fort Larned National Historic Site Document*,  
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## Purpose



*FORT LARNED NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE preserves, protects, and interprets the original structures and landscape of Fort Larned, as well as remains of the Santa Fe Trail, commemorating the significant role they played in opening the American West, while making these resources available for the experience, enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation of visitors.*



## Significance

Significance statements express why a park's resources and values are important enough to merit designation as a unit of the national park system. These statements are linked to the purpose of Fort Larned National Historic Site and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Statements of significance describe the distinctive nature of the park and why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. They focus on the most important resources and values that will assist in park planning and management.

The following significance statements have been identified for Fort Larned National Historic Site. (Please note that the sequence of the statements does not reflect the level of significance.)

- **Historic Fort Buildings and Setting.** The original buildings of Fort Larned, situated in a relatively undisturbed setting, comprise one of the most complete military posts remaining on the Santa Fe Trail. Fort Larned's setting, cultural landscape, intact historic buildings, and furnishings provide the visitor with an authentic experience of a typical western frontier fort protecting U.S. interests.
- **Protecting the Santa Fe Trail and Westward Expansion.** Fort Larned played an important role in protecting people, mail, and cargo traveling back and forth on the Santa Fe Trail in the 1860s. Fort Larned had a role in peacekeeping for a large geographic area of the United States, and it is the best surviving example from a system of frontier forts on the central Plains along the Santa Fe Trail.
- **Hub of Cultural Interchange.** As both an active military post and an Indian Agency, Fort Larned and its sutler's store were a focal point for cultural exchange and conflict among the variety of peoples (American Indians; U.S. military, including Buffalo Soldiers; military families and hangers-on; Hispanic traders; civilians; and other travelers on the Santa Fe Trail) on the Plains during the Indian War period.



## Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Historic Structures and Parade Ground**
- **Setting/Cultural Landscape**
- **Santa Fe Trail Ruts**
- **Original Fort Larned Artifacts from Period of Significance**
- **Archeological Remains from Period of Significance**



Fort Larned National Historic Site contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Period Artifacts on Display**
- **Collections and Artifacts from Ranching Period and Pre-Military American Indian Period at the Site**



## Interpretive Themes



Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- The road to Santa Fe, or the Santa Fe Trail, increased trade, travel, and commerce, facilitating a rich cultural exchange across the growing American West.
- Through Fort Larned and a network of military posts, the U.S. government established its authority and control and extended its influence throughout the region.
- The culture and lifestyle of the Plains Indians were irreversibly altered by encroaching nonnative people.
- People from a variety of cultures, both soldiers and civilians, interacted at Fort Larned and all along the Santa Fe Trail, including European Americans, Hispanics, American Indians, and Buffalo Soldiers.
- The Plains environment significantly influenced the lives of all who lived there, and they in turn were significantly altered by the human presence.
- As a nearly complete “soldier town” on the frontier, the events of everyday life played out at Fort Larned as they would in any small town.

# Description

Fort Larned National Historic Site, 6 miles west of Larned in Pawnee County, Kansas, was authorized by Public Law 88-541 in 1964 to commemorate the significant role played by Fort Larned on the Santa Fe Trail in the opening of the West. The park preserves, protects, and interprets the original and reconstructed fort buildings and central parade ground, also its surrounding cultural landscape/setting and natural resources, circa 1860 to 1884. This time frame included the American Civil War and “Western Front Indian Wars” eras. These resources are preserved in perpetuity to make this valuable part of America’s heritage available to visitors for their experience, enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation.

The park presently consists of 718.39 acres; 410 acres are owned fee simple and the remainder in scenic easement. Much of the land is shortgrass prairie, preserving the setting and viewshed of the historic fort. The Pawnee River and an old oxbow, so critical to the choice of the fort’s location and defenses, are clearly visible. Gallery forest along the banks of the river is also present in the park. Nine original stone buildings are arranged around the fort’s parade ground. A 44.44 acre tract of unbroken prairie approximately 5.5 miles from the fort structures contains clearly visible wagon ruts from the Santa Fe Trail and an active prairie dog town.

From 1821 to 1880, the Santa Fe Trail was one of America’s most important overland routes. It carried several million dollars per year in commercial traffic between Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Independence, Missouri. The acquisition of vast new territories by the United States after the war with Mexico, and the gold rushes of 1849 and 1858, further boosted traffic on the trail. Inevitably, the influx of merchants, gold seekers, and adventurers disrupted the American Indian way of life. Believing their existence in jeopardy, the tribes struck back, attacking commerce, mail shipments, and travelers on the Santa Fe Trail.

The U.S. Army set up a military post in 1859 on the banks of the Pawnee River about five miles from its junction with the Arkansas River. In June 1860, the camp was moved farther west, where a more durable sod-and-adobe fort was built and named for U.S. Army Paymaster-General Col. Benjamin F. Larned. Fort Larned’s stone buildings were constructed in 1865–1868. The fort’s buildings are restored and most

are fully furnished. Park exhibits commemorate Fort Larned, the Santa Fe Trail, the U.S. military, and the multiple cultures affected by the Santa Fe Trail and U.S. westward expansion in the region. Living history is an important part of interpretive programs at Fort Larned. In addition to park programs on-site and outreach at schools and libraries, the park has developed programs to interpret a Cheyenne/Sioux village, owned and managed by a park partner, the Fort Larned Old Guard.

Fort Larned National Historic Site has exceptional value in illustrating the history of the United States and makes available a unique visitor experience. The park is a time capsule of a typical western frontier fort in the 19th century. Fort Larned was the scene of some notable events and the authentic fort buildings and period furnishings provide a glimpse of what life at the fort was like at the time period across the frontier.

